Labour of becoming a (critical) management scholar: Ambivalences, tensions and possibilities

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Introduction

Recently there has been a discussion about the hardships of generating and maintaining the identity of 'critical scholar' in business schools while an alienating 'game' is upon us. As (particularly emerging) critical scholars argue about the difficulties of being outside of the mainstream and how the institutional mechanisms make things worse for them, they give voice in defence of the 'critical' work in business schools by telling personally how they confront with such challenges (Bristow, 2012; Cederström and Hoedemaekers, 2012; Prasad, 2013).

Following their reflexive arguments, I would like to contribute to this discussion with my own personal narrative to demonstrate how the labour of becoming a (critical) management scholar could be full of ambivalences, tensions and possibilities if you come from a different structural and cultural setting – in my case from Turkey. My objective is to provide a personal account about this labour process (agency) and how this 'being/becoming' turns into a struggle for self-existence, not just in my home country, but also in the community I believe I belong to (structure). Therefore, I want to problematise and write about mechanisms and tensions that already define a fragile and doubtful academic subjectivity for an emerging scholar. While I cannot help but compare differences in my background in terms of education, language, culture and history with my colleagues, inevitably I have been trying to understand the subjectivity of a critical (management) scholar – which may be broadly drawn as competent in Western critical/radical theories, writing clearly and with depth in English. Accordingly, the questioning follows: what kind of critical subjectivity

am I trying to fit into, how has my-self[1] been shaped throughout my own education and my career, can I really fit into this subjectivity as a non-native English speaker, and to what extent can I challenge this subjectivity?

Two main issues emerge in this note: (1) The position of the mainstream education I have been exposed to and my response to that in the form of approaching critical management studies (CMS) as an antidote – perhaps in a misleading way, as I will argue below. (2) The challenging position of English language, which while helping me access resources and communicate with others (i.e. creating possibilities), at the same time, has been a tool of colonial domination limiting my capabilities of expression, thinking and finding my own voice[2] – particularly after I began working in an English speaking country, Aotearoa New Zealand. While it seems that I am providing a personal narrative here, I believe that it expresses concerns that are shared widely among international scholars and therefore needs further discussion and problematisation inclusive of issues around the identity work of (critical) management scholarship, and use and domination of the English language in the academy leading to feelings of exclusion and incompetency.

Non-Western, Oriental, the Other, Hybrid: Who am I giving voice?

My approach in this note particularly relates to a broader conception of post-colonial theory; Said's (1979) orientalism may help me question the assumptions of the universality of the mainstream Western management education or the Eurocentrism of critical theories (am I the Oriental, the Other?), Bhabha (1994) may lead me to seek how Turkish management education mimics USA management education/research practices whilst forming some hybrid explanations or 'third spaces' in the fractures (am I the hybrid engaging with the mainstream and critiquing it?), and Spivak (1988) with her strategic essentialism perspective may assist my questioning about my position in the CMS community and the use of English language by a Turkish, middle class, male non-English speaker (am I the Turkish subaltern that cannot speak with/in the form of Western epistemologies/language?). In other words, am I the new Other? New Hybrid? Another subaltern of CMS? From my perspective, they are all valid questions and I have no answer as yet. In the following I derive some arguments from the abovementioned theoretical positions and this note is an effort to figure

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[1]   I deliberately write myself as my-self in order to point out how self is shaped through my experiences and how I try to fit this 'self' into subjectivities.

[2]   In agreement with the editors, this note has not been copy-edited for style (only typographical errors) by the native English-speaking editors to preserve my voice and challenges I experience as a non-native English speaker.

it out. However, in the broader framework of postcolonial organisation studies, I will mostly depend on my own reaction to the epistemic coloniality (Ibarra-Colado, 2006) of mainstream management education which led me into contact with critical studies of management and organisation, and the accompanying struggles to become a management scholar.

It should be acknowledged that CMS is neither a 'theory' itself, nor representative of a 'discipline' given that it hosts various conflicting and diverse theoretical traditions. However, it is already institutionalised with conferences, handbooks, PhD programs and journals with/despite its own contradictions and issues related to the geographical, cultural differences, gendered asymmetrical power relations as well as other divisions, exclusions and marginalisations (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014; Faria, 2013; Tatli, 2012). In the following, in addition to aiming to answer whether or not I fit into the subjectivity of the critical scholar, I will explain my own relationship with this contested term and how I ascribed strong meanings to it. I begin my story from my undergraduate degree because this is the initial point where my structuration originated and for the first time where I met (was intoxicated?) with mainstream management education.

Structure: Writing from an epistemic coloniality (Thesis)

Business schools in Turkey were founded on the premise of transferred knowledge from the USA and that Turkish PhDs of business administration who got their degree in the USA were the pioneer scholars shaping management education and research in Turkey (Üsdiken and Wasti, 2009). It should be also noted that this trajectory is quite different from, for instance, the business schools in United Kingdom which, when they were founded, recruited many scholars from other disciplines including sociology, psychology and anthropology and thus brought significant critical flavour to management education and research (Grey and Willmott, 2005).

I got my undergraduate degree in business administration from a respectable business school giving education in English and this has been certainly a desirable asset and a privilege when it comes to being recruited by multinational companies. Our USA based textbooks published in the English language were also full of cases that originated in similar companies. Colonisation was in play already via such an education: You get a degree in business administration, in English, and a multinational company is your career destination.

Following my first year as an undergraduate the fragmentation of my identity began. In view of my social skills, my parents probably believed I would be successful in the business world. Also, having lived the negative outcomes of being political actors in different social movements in Turkey at the end of the 1970s, my parents may have assumed that studying at an apolitical business school would be better for my future (although that might be my own reasoning or attempt to ignore the fact that I purposely chose that department when I was young, attracted to the promises of the market ideology – you can be a CEO!). However, in line with this assumption of a-political-ness, in the school, even though there was a liberal environment in terms of initiating discussions regarding the role of businesses (especially in courses on ethics and management culture), it was very rare to have a critical/radical perspective on the role of managers and businesses. In this education, with hindsight, I can argue that capitalism was taken-for-granted as it was never a topic/part of a course, businesses were naturally blessed and there was no alternative to market economy to discuss. The general structure was more or less the same for postgraduate as in the undergraduate programs which I attended for my Master's (in English) and PhD (in Turkish); transferred, translated, USA originated and mildly localised management knowledge but devoid of critical theories of management and organisation. We were given the outcomes of discussions that took place in a different (say, Western) world – mostly positivistic, quantitative and seemingly without alternatives.

While studying towards my PhD, I worked as a graduate assistant in the same institution teaching management, in English, for more than seven years. In the beginning of my academic career I had sympathy for behavioural aspects of management believing that these represented the most humane face of management education (due to lack of a critical position, how could I know that behaviourism was driven by the performance orientation of the business discourse?). There was no place/opportunity to discuss epistemology and ontology (they were all taken-for-granted, another signifier of epistemic coloniality, I suppose). However, during the master's program I was still questioning the functionalist assumptions ('implications for managers') and extensive quantitative approaches while still exclusively reading organisational behaviour articles originated from USA business schools.

Apparently, throughout this process, I was colonised by the main assumptions of the positivist epistemology and quantitative methodology, and could not even imagine an alternative way of doing research. At the same time, while I was searching the Redhouse dictionary on my desk for the best suitable word and meaning to express my ideas in my Master's thesis, still, as a result of my fragmented academic-self, another part of me was asking lots of questions: Do

we need to produce knowledge for managers / businesses? What about capitalist relations and their impact? Why do we need to prioritise quantitative over qualitative methods? Even though I enjoyed the challenge of mastering English, owing to all these institutional and educational regimes (which paradoxically also helped me find an academic job), I was feeling like I did not belong to this field called business administration.

Agency – Opening a space with CMS (Anti-Thesis)

When I was a PhD student, just by chance I encountered some alternative and critical studies of management and organisation. Talking about power relations from critical/radical perspectives, and criticising the role of the businesses in regards to environmental degradation, social inequality and exploitative workplace arrangements, I was amazed how these assumptions fitted with my own worldview. I was thrilled by the level of theoretical discussion and positioning of the management knowledge. After being infiltrated by core business education for years with the given assumptions of market economy with performative businesses, I jumped in with both feet to understand what this thing called CMS is and embraced it as a resistance realm to the epistemic coloniality of mainstream education. Hence, I immediately began reading now-classics of foundational discussions around CMS and following critical journals such as *Organization*, *ephemera* and *Critical Perspectives on International Business*. However, this time I was reading the studies related to the other side of the Western context (the UK context, New Public Management reforms, managerialism and others), mostly carrying the traces of a different geography and history as well as criticisms of CMS in terms of its male domination, Eurocentrism, theoretical incoherency and pessimism. While I was trying to make sense of all these different (but valid) points, at the same time, in Turkish business schools we had a completely different agenda for studying businesses. Touching local issues was another matter of concern which required problematisation of the nature of CMS knowledge in regards to its use of abstract theory and lack of practical implications (Alakavuklar and Parker, 2011).

In the beginning of the third year of my PhD, I had chance to visit the University of Leicester School of Management where my entire understanding evolved and developed (special thanks to Stephen Dunne who was my mentor during my visit). I was a PhD student coming from the (mainstream) periphery and the School of Management at Leicester had a completely different context: a vibrant PhD community, dedicated and productive critical scholars. I even had chance to collaborate with prominent CMS scholar Martin Parker and the output helped

me begin talking to my own scholarly community for the first time while referring to my own local context in the study.

After coming back to Turkey, with the legitimacy of coming from a kind of centre, and, thanks to the understanding of my supervisors, I began writing a thesis with a critical perspective. I mention their support here because it was not common for a Turkish business school to approve a critical and conceptual PhD thesis. However, given the support I was receiving, most of the time it was a matter of concern for some of my professors how such an approach would be useful for Turkey, the Turkish context and Turkish businesses as well (thinking about this in retrospect, it was a fair question, although I would now argue how my thesis was useful for those who may have an anti-capitalist or anti-managerial stance). Eventually, after much hard work, not least struggling with feelings of insecurity and the need to gain approval, I was able to finish my PhD. However, I was not sure whether or not my work would be sufficient to speak to the international community of critical management scholars.[3]

Now I realise that the perspective of my PhD thesis was certainly critical but not sufficiently theoretically developed. Rather than getting deeper into a specific theory, I have skimmed the theoretical discussions around my topic and focussed on representing the main assumptions around the ethos of the CMS, in fact, belonging to somewhere else. Hence, I may have voluntarily changed my 'colonial master' during my PhD thesis, which subsequently took me from one subjectification to another coming with a different labour: the feeling of lack of self-confidence in regards to mastery of a specific Western critical theory because of not being supported intellectually, and the perception of being an outsider linguistically, geographically, historically and contextually. Perhaps, as Ibarra-Colado (2006) would argue, I should have rather focussed on forming my own genuine thoughts and producing critical knowledge related to my local context.

To demonstrate the hegemony of epistemic coloniality of mainstream education embedded in this structure and the perception of critical research, let me give a prominent example. In one of my presentations, in the last year of my PhD, at the National Congress of Management and Organization, one of the best-known and knowledgeable professors told me that it was probably the first time he had seen the name Braverman in the twenty-year-history of national congresses in Turkey. Naturally, I was in a compromising position as a mere graduate assistant

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3   However, as one of the reviewers fairly argued that there may not be such a community feeling and the community itself can be alienating or constraining for many others. As an early career academic coming from different background and attending international conferences very recently, it may have been my romanticisation and idealisation of a community 'out there'.

before the already solidified structure in Turkish academy, but I was still using every opportunity to present assumptions of critical work as a form of resistance.

While teaching as a graduate assistant, within the limited opportunities I tried to embed questions that would initiate discussions about the performance orientation of management practice and knowledge (e.g. 'what do you think about employee resistance to managerial control?'), or aimed to locate businesses in a broader context to demonstrate how they might be ignorant of social, ethical and environmental issues as a result of the market dynamics. In my research, I aimed to draw the attention of other scholars to how critical perspectives might be useful for understanding the contested political nature of organisations and management knowledge. I had some encouraging interest with discouraging suspicion as a reaction in conferences (e.g. 'What you argue seems interesting, but is it possible to publish with these theories in top journals?'). Generally, I was alone in this endeavour and I felt like I needed to engage with like-minded scholars to improve my academic skills. Beginning with my PhD process, an alternative academic subjectivity has emerged, one with fragmentations, feelings of vulnerability and new questions trying to locate this 'self' in the academy.

Connecting with the (idealised) community? (Synthesis – A new Thesis)

The synthesis brought me to a totally new context and to a new structure. After moving from one geo-episteme (Turkey) to another (Aotearoa New Zealand) (Faria, 2013) my epistemology and politics of knowledge have definitely changed. First, my new country is another interesting realm in terms of colonisation of the land, epistemology and linguistics, and second, now I feel that I am a part of like-minded critical scholars, and more often attending international conferences. However, when I assess my own personal history that brought me here, fractures and flaws of my subjectivity deepen as a result of dialectics that shape my fragility and identity, especially in relation to lack of mastery of critical theory and competency of my language skills. When I began engaging with my colleagues in various occasions including seminars, departmental discussions and reading groups, I had to confront with my intellectual and linguistic limits. While it is pretty easy for a colleague of mine to use their deep theoretical knowledge in a scholarly discussion – drawn from their PhD studies and delivered with the fluency of a native English speaker, inevitably I re-consider the limits of my PhD thesis and coursework, try to read more and more to fill the gaps in my knowledge about critical theories, and at the same time work on a new research agenda to prove how I am improving in scholarly terms. This means obviously more labour with full of ambivalence and tension in addition to frustration about the capabilities of my-self.

Wrestling with English is always an inseparable part of these practices in addition to research and teaching. It gets harder when you write manuscripts as journal articles are the only ways to talk to your community and to 'make myself heard' (Śliwa and Johansson, 2015): checking counts of Google for controlling which sentence structure or word order would make more sense; reading the requirements for polishing or about the need for grammatical control (including this submission) in nearly every review of my manuscripts (which may also require a budget to buy such a service); and, fighting each time with my imaginary successful academic-self about the perception of linguistic and intellectual incompetency. When teaching native English speakers, I have to be extremely careful about how to write my exam questions, how to respond to their e-mails and how to do 'jokes' in class. While lecturing, I find myself thinking twice about whether I used or will be using the correct tense of the most suitable verb or whether an article (definite or indefinite) is required in a particular instance. The constant anxiety of doing/speaking something wrong has become a normal and natural labour of my job. It is a concern whether one of the students will complain about my accent or my use of English in the next student survey.

Language turns out to be more than a communication tool, one that may easily transform into a power mechanism, and, along with the perceived feeling of incompetency, may limit my access to and participation in my community in terms of time, effort and cost, constrain dissemination of my knowledge and require negotiations and compromises about my identity as a non-native English speaker (e.g. perceived as more reserved or indirect) (see Śliwa and Johansson, 2015). Whilst I struggle to try to fit into the critical 'subjectivity', I cannot escape from another domination (can we say exclusion?) embodied in the form of language.

Conclusion

My subjectivity and labour of becoming a critical scholar is an ongoing, ceaseless, and delightful but at the same time painful process: How should I master a theoretical position? How should I improve my language competency? How can I prove my academic competency? This inevitably creates ongoing cycles of anxiety, anger and frustration with further struggles. However, as suggested by one of the reviewers, in fact, the writing experience has provided me the opportunity to question the dominant subjectivity and opened up a space to construct a possibility of an alternative academic identity to find my own voice – which has been an enlightening, liberating and reliving exercise so far. This process of 'making my-self heard' here then turns into a learning effort about proliferating other prospects in the academy as well as a practice of resistance

and challenge to singular perception of the critical subjectivity.[4] This note, consequently, is not to complain but to demonstrate this labour of becoming a critical management scholar coming with the feelings of ambivalence, tension and possibilities within these structural dynamics.

Apparently my colleagues who have been vocal from different Western institutions have their own struggles and tensions; yet, they may be also kind of privileged considering the positive structural and contextual factors supporting their intellectual development compared to my conditions. While their labour is about fighting to maintain the identity of the critical scholar against various institutional mechanisms, my labour has been about finding my way as a critical scholar accompanied by a struggle in relation to English language and theoretical/scholarly competency. Hence, in response to the critical subjectivity I aim to fit into, now I have an answer. I can argue that my labour of becoming is all about the abovementioned postcolonial positions as one of the multiple subjectivities with its own challenges and possibilities in the academy – the new 'Other' coming from Turkey into a project called CMS having its own issues and constraining aspects; 'the subaltern' due to struggles with English language and Western critical theories; and 'the hybrid' being exposed to mainstream business education but working hard to balance this view with alternative epistemologies.

I believe that, regardless of their theoretical approaches, there are many other scholars who have been through in similar labour processes in the academy. Hence, I would like to invite them, including native and non-native English speakers, who are exposed not only to the linguistic colonialism of the English language but also to the epistemic and gendered colonialism of the mainstream or critical assumptions, to be vocal. If we are to produce knowledge in English-only journals to survive in the academy and to communicate each other via such journals, why not submit our reflexive stories and research to those journals with the aim of exposing, intervening in, problematising and possibly resisting to the structural, contextual, gendered and institutional regimes that create inequalities in the (Anglophone) academy for us? Apparently, English language then may have a very ambivalent position for us, restricting on one hand, but enabling possibilities on the other to challenge what is imposed. Only insofar as we analyse these problems critically and show operation of power mechanisms openly can we imagine alternatives collectively (see Tietze and Dick, 2013). In doing this we should demonstrate how our subjectivities are defined and how we are disciplined (marginalised?) epistemologically/linguistically in the academy even by those (supposedly) critical assumptions as in the case of the CMS.

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[4]   Most likely idealised and constructed as a male critical management scholar who speaks and writes fluently in English and has lots of publications!

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